



HOW IMPORTANT WERE THE CONVERSI IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CISTERCIAN ORDER?

THE CLOISTER AND THE WORLD: ASSIGNMENT 03

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The *conversi* (or lay brothers / brethren) were an important component of Cistercian life, performing much of the manual labour mandated by the Rule of Saint Benedict (RSB) and contributing significantly to the economic success of the order. This essay will discuss and analyse the origins and necessity of the *conversi*, why and how the *conversi* were so important to the development of the Cistercian order, and why their numbers eventually began to decline.

Driven by what they perceived as laxity and deviation from following the RSB, a group of monks left the Benedictine abbey of Molesme in 1098 to form their own community, the abbey of Citeaux - devoted to a stricter adherence of the rule. From this single house grew one of the largest and most successful monastic orders in Europe – the Cistercians – whose reformative ideology and devotion to the RSB gained them many admirers and benefactors.

One of the ways in which their stricter adherence manifested was through a return to manual labour, as necessitated by rule 48 (“Daily Manual Labour”) of the RSB.¹ In Benedictine monasticism of the eleventh century, the majority of manual labour was carried out by domestic servants within the monastery and by peasant labour on the estates. This is evident in the writings of the Benedictine monk Orderic Vitalis, who wrote that abbeys in the past had “introduced numerous dependents to carry out all the external duties and established monks to devote their time to sacred reading(..)” and additionally “(it is for) peasants to perform work in the fields”.² Although labour forms an integral part of the RSB, it is unlikely that even large Benedictine houses would have been able to accommodate the amount of manual labour required to keep the abbey running alongside their liturgical commitments without assistance.

The Cistercians, instead of hiring lay domestic workers and using peasant labour like the Benedictines before them, created a subclass of monks who would be devoted largely to manual labour – the *conversi*. *Conversi* were not unique to the Cistercians, and already existed in other orders to varying degrees, but it was the Cistercians who really defined and expanded the role. These Cistercian *conversi* were intended to be

¹ Benedict of Nursia and Carolinne White, ‘48: Daily Manual Labour’, in *The Rule of St Benedict* (Penguin Classics, 2008), pp. 72–73.

² ‘Book 8: Section 26’, in O. Vitalis and M. Chibnall, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), iv, pp. 312–28.

treated as equals and would live within the monastery or on monastery-owned land (granges) as illiterate lay monks, but would have their liturgical labour diminished in favour of performing manual work. However, the *conversi* are not a concept in the RSB and thus would not have been in the minds of the monks who founded or joined Cîteaux in the early years. For these monks, a return to manual labour to better adhere to the principles of the RSB was a priority, and the manual labour was performed by the monks themselves. Evidence for this comes largely from depictions in early manuscripts, notably from Cîteaux, where several depictions of monks chopping wood and harvesting wheat can be seen in manuscripts made in the first two decades of the Cistercian order forming.³ However, in the 1110s as the order began to expand and daughter houses were created, it became apparent that specialised help was needed in order to maintain their commitment to following the RSB as closely as possible; likely the same problem faced by the Benedictines of centuries past. The *Exordium Parvum* introduces the *conversi* in chapter 15:

“Having spurned this world's riches, behold! the new soldiers of Christ, poor with the poor Christ, began discussing by what planning, by what device, by what management they would be able to support themselves in this life, as well as the guests who came, both rich and poor, whom the Rule commands to welcome as Christ. It was then that they enacted a definition to receive, with their bishop's permission, bearded laybrothers, and to treat them as themselves in life and death except that they may not become monks and also hired hands (..)”⁴

From this it can be ascertained that the Cistercians recognised the importance of the *conversi* in two distinct ways: their existence facilitates the choir monks to focus on their religious and spiritual duties, and the inclusion of the *conversi* as monks themselves adds a spiritual element to their manual labour which could be interpreted as a stronger adherence to the RSB. It also mentions that hired help (*mercenarii*) is utilised in order to assist the *conversi*, which is a distinction from the total reliance on hired and possibly indentured labour as utilised by the Benedictines of the time. Finally, although the passage states that the *conversi* should be equal in

³ Dijon, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 170, fol 75.v amongst other depictions in the same manuscript.

⁴ Pauline Matarasso, ‘The Little Exord’, in *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century* (Penguin Classics, 1993).

life and death, it is clear the impetus of their creation is to support the choir monks in what can be interpreted as a one-way relationship, and additionally that the *conversi* may never become choir monks themselves. This is perhaps the genesis of the inequality that would later contribute to the decline of the *conversi*.

The exact date of the introduction of the *conversi* is unknown and continues to be a point of debate, however it must have been before c. 1120 when Stephen Harding wrote the first iteration of the *Usus Conversorum* (UC) – a customary by which the *conversi* should live, similar but distinct from the RSB. It is clear from the prologue to this text that the first signs of real-world inequality between the choir monks and *conversi* in day-to-day life are beginning to show, even though inclusion of the *conversi* was still a recent development:

“Since it is clear that we have received from bishops the care of souls of lay brothers equally as of monks, I am amazed that certain of our abbots devote indeed all due diligence of discipline to the monks but none or little to the lay brothers. Some, holding them in concepts because of their innate simplicity, think that material food and clothing are to be provided more sparingly than for monks, but that they are nevertheless imperiously to be made to do forced labour.”⁵

Stephen goes on further to describe that some abbots, evidently feeling sorry for the *conversi*, provide them with larger amounts of food to accommodate for their high physical workload and allow greater laxity with their clothing, which is directly opposed to the idea of monastic equality – even if it seems logical given their vocation and responsibilities. As the monks are meant to be one and the same by definition in order to fulfil the RSB, both situations were not viewed favourably by the wider order and thus the UC serves as an intervention to address the inequalities. It details rules specific to the daily life of the *conversi* and attempts to ensure their treatment is fair. It also does defer some decisions to the abbot (much like the RSB), such as the decision to allow *conversi* to eat a breakfast (*mixt*) to provide sustenance before they start their daily labour. The UC also stresses that the *conversi* should follow a limited monastic routine, listing the specific times of day they should pray

⁵ Chrysogonus Waddell and James France, ‘Cistercian Lay Brother Usages’, in *Separate but Equal - Cistercian Lay Brothers 1120 - 1350* (Cistercian Publications, 2012), pp. 333–44.

and which prayers they should know, but also despite intentions to address inequalities, does heavily imply a sense of subordination of the *conversi*. It has to be questioned how well the *conversi* knew the *Usages* – their own rights within the order - due to their illiteracy; it is possible that chapters were read during mealtimes or meetings much like the RSB was in Chapter House meetings for the monks, but this is not clear.

Although somewhat of a simplification, one could state that the choir monks are devoted to prayer and the *conversi* are devoted to work, it is not to say that the *conversi* did not have religious duties. Their very inclusion as brothers within the order reflected Cistercian ideologies about manual labour and spirituality, and thus they were required to learn at least three prayers by heart (the *Pater Noster*, the *Credo*, and the *Miserere*).⁶ Their illiteracy prevented them from following a full *lectio divina*, but they were expected to perform these prayers upon waking, at their workplace during the day, and to physically attend mass on Sundays and feast days at the abbey (if feasible).⁷ Similarly, the choir monks still performed some limited manual labour, typically in areas within the cloister such as the kitchen, but also (presumably) in the autumn where they were occasionally sent to granges to assist with the harvest - evidence of which is described in the *Vita Aelredi*,⁸ as well as in a statute from 1160:

*“For the purposes of shearing sheep, for picking grapes, or for labour of any kind – it is not permitted to send (choir) monks to the granges - except for purposes of harvesting crops”.*⁹

Physically, the choir monks were tonsured and clean shaven in appearance, whereas the *conversi* had fringes and beards – a popular fashion for lay men at the time and a useful way to distinguish the *conversi* from the choir monks (both in physicality at the time, and also for contemporary analysis of Cistercians in artwork) - leading to one of their nicknames, the *barbarati* (bearded ones). The clothing worn by the *conversi* was more similar in appearance to that of peasants rather than the habit

⁶ Waddell and France, ‘Cistercian Lay Brother Usages’.

⁷ Waddell and France, ‘Cistercian Lay Brother Usages’.

⁸ Walter Daniel, Marsha Dutton, and F. M. Powicke, ‘Chapter 12: Aelred at Manual Work’, in *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx & The Letter to Maurice* (Cistercian Publications, 1994), pp. 105–06.

⁹ Chrysogonus Waddell, ‘Annual Statuta: 1157 - 1161: Anno M.C.LX 3’, in *Twelfth-Century Statutes from the Cistercian General Chapter: Latin Text with English Notes and Commentary* (2002; Cîteaux), p. 72. Translation my own.

worn by monks,¹⁰ with several changes of garment provided for those with more arduous or dirty jobs (such as smocks for blacksmiths).¹¹

The typical layout of a Cistercian monastery also delineated a clear divide between the choir monks and the *conversi*, with the *conversi* range usually located at the west side of the complex. This in effect created two separate communities within the same monastery that, with some exceptions, were not intended to regularly interact. The complexes were intentionally designed to segregate the two groups of monks, especially at larger abbeys like Fountains where cloisters and a wider range of rooms specifically for use of lay brothers could be created – creating essentially a separate, but attached, abbey complex.¹² Shared spaces were limited but typically included the kitchen, which was used to cook food for both sets of monks, and the church itself – which although shared was still segregated between the two groups and often had separate entrances. The separation of the two groups of monks by architectural design may have, over time, led to further sense of alienation between the two groups – but despite this, *conversi* and choir monk interactions and friendships were not uncommon. As the decline of the *conversi* began, some new monasteries built truncated western ranges and smaller churches which reflected the dwindling number of *conversi* – and in the late Middle Ages, some western ranges were converted to other purposes entirely.

Conversi could be recruited to the monasteries in numerous ways, but it is likely that most often they were local men from the general area around the abbey – something not necessarily true for choir monks, who may have originated from abbeys elsewhere in the country or even from abroad. This can be seen in the recorded names of the *conversi* as compared to the choir monks - such as those of Øm Abbey in Denmark, who have typical Danish names in comparison to the many foreign-born monks and abbots – and evident again at Margam Abbey in Wales, where large numbers of *conversi* have typical Welsh names compared to the choir monks.¹³ This

¹⁰ ‘Lay-Brothers’, The Cistercians in Yorkshire, 2020 <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/cistercian-life/lay-brothers/>> [accessed 12 April 2026].

¹¹ Waddell and France, ‘Cistercian Lay Brother Usages’.

¹² Julie Kerr and Sarah Foot, ‘Lay Brothers’ Range – The Cistercians in Yorkshire’, The Cistercians in Yorkshire, n.d. <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/fountains-abbey/buildings/lay-brothers-range/>> [accessed 17 March 2026].

¹³ ‘Who Were the Lay Brothers?’, in J. France, *Separate but Equal - Cistercian Lay Brothers 1120 - 1350* (Cistercian Publications, 2012), p. 16.

makes sense considering one of the ways in which the Cistercians prepared their acquired land for building the abbey complex and for granges: displacement of the peasant population originally living or working on that land. At least during the twelfth century, the displaced peasantry may have been given the option to join as *conversi* or to move onto new locales.¹⁴ Joining the Cistercian order would doubtless have been an appealing prospect for the displaced peasantry at the time. The twelfth century was a time of economic boom, with a population increase partly due to (amongst other things) the combined climatic effect of the Medieval Warm Period which lasted from c.950 – 1250 AD, and the innovation of the heavy plough. The warmer weather increased crop yields through a longer and warmer growing season, and the plough enabled clay and other types of heavy soil to be used for planting for the first time.¹⁵ Land would have been in short supply due to unprecedented demand, so it is not difficult to imagine why the Cistercian order may have been appealing to the displaced peasants who found themselves as casualties of Cistercian land depopulation after benefactor land donation; gaining job security as well as salvation. Similarly, the Cistercians themselves gain benefit from recruiting these men - not only by steadily growing their ranks, but also by retaining people who knew the land and the surrounding area and can use their experience, local knowledge, and connections to maximise the potential of the land, thus achieving a level of economic success that may have been more difficult or taken longer to achieve with people unfamiliar to the area.

However, it was not just the peasantry that became *conversi*: a number of nobles also joined the order as *conversi*, sometimes bringing their own land holdings with them. This seems to have been a fairly common practice until 1188, when a statute was passed that stated that nobles who join the order must join as choir monks, not as *conversi*. The reason why is not explicitly stated, but perhaps the nobility were more likely to be literate and thus more useful to the order as a choir monk than a lay brother. Similarly, because the *conversi* population had increased substantially in the second half of the twelfth century due to the economic success that they brought the Cistercians, they sometimes outnumbered the choir monks at a 1:3 ratio. It is

¹⁴ 'The Creation of the Cistercian Grange', in J. Burton, *The Monastic Order in Yorkshire, 1069–1215* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 256.

¹⁵ Thomas Barnebeck Andersen, Peter Sandholt Jensen, and Christian Volmar Skovsgaard, 'The Heavy Plow and the Agricultural Revolution in Medieval Europe', *Journal of Development Economics*, 118 (2016), pp. 133–49, doi:10.1016/j.jdeveco.2015.08.006.o

therefore possible it was a small attempt at re-balancing the intake. Walter Daniel in the *Vita Aelredi* describes how there were about 140 monks and 500 *conversi* and workers at Rievaulx Abbey the time of Aelred's death in 1167.¹⁶ So busy was the church on feast days that he described it as "crowded with the brethren like bees in a hive, unable to move (..), clustered together into one angelical body",¹⁷ emphasising the large number of monks associated with the abbey, but subtly implying an equality between the two groups – moving as one holy entity. By Walter's own description, the number of monks and *conversi* had doubled under Aelred's abbacy – a clear indication not only of a successful abbacy, but also the growing importance of the *conversi* to the overall success of the order.

Granges and the Role of the Conversi

Granges were areas of land, managed and staffed by the *conversi* with assistance from hired help, commonly used for farming (but also mining, fishing, forestry, and other activities) to produce products for both monastic use and for trade – forming the backbone of the Cistercian economy. The link between the *conversi* and the running of the granges was first alluded to in the *Exordium Parvum*, which not only describes the division of labour but, intentionally or not, supports the segregation of the two sets of monks:

"And since they had set up farmsteads for agricultural development in a number of different places, they decreed that the aforesaid laybrothers, not the monks, should be in charge of those dwellings, because, according to the Rule, monks should reside in their own cloister."

The type of farming performed on granges was varied and highly specific to where the grange was located. For example, sheep farming dominated the granges of the Yorkshire Cistercian monasteries, particularly Fountains Abbey - which by 1291 had approximately 15,000 sheep spread across its granges,¹⁸ and profits from the sale of wool was said to be three times as high than all other sources of their income. Arable farming was also very common - as well as fishing and other specialised industries,

¹⁶ 'Chapter 30: The Increase in Numbers', in M. Dutton and W. Daniel, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx & The Letter to Maurice* (Cistercian Publications, 1994), pp. 118–19.

¹⁷ 'Chapter 30: The Increase in Numbers'.

¹⁸ 'Pastoralism: Sheep Rearing and Wool Production', in D. H. Williams, *The Cistercians in the Early Middle Ages* (Gracewing, 1998), pp. 355–57.

such as North Grange belonging to Meaux Abbey which had a tile kiln, tanners, and blacksmiths on site. In warmer climates, such as in France, grange economies relying on temperate weather conditions could be commonly seen, such as those based around wine production (such as Clairvaux's Morvaux and Colomb  -le-Sec granges – or “celliers” as they were known locally when the focus was on wine production), and olive oil production (such as Rueda Abbey in Spain which had seven olive tree granges along the river Elbro). Whilst certainly some granges did focus on a single economy, it would be more common for a single grange to have mixed economies. An abbey is likely to have had a diverse set of economies across their granges in order to not solely rely on one single source of income – accommodating for things like crop failure and disease.

All granges were initially meant to be within one day's travel of the abbey, primarily so that the *conversi* could return to the abbey on Sundays and feast days as directed by the UC, but potentially also for administrative reasons and ease of management. However, as the order began to attract large numbers of benefactors and patrons, donations of land at considerable distance from the main abbey complex began to be more commonplace (such as the grange of Stainborough, run by Rievaulx Abbey, which was situated some 70 miles south of the main complex). In order to accommodate the *conversi* throughout the week and to aid them in their work, large grange complexes were built which typically included a dormitory, a refectory, a calefactory, a chapel, and various agricultural and industrial buildings and structures as needed facilitate specific activities on the grange. These agricultural buildings typically included a barn, which is thought to have provided the basis for the term “grange” (*grangia* meaning barn in Latin).

Each grange was run by a senior lay brother appointed as the granger. Grangers would act as foremen on the granges, assigning work to other *conversi* and to the hired help, but also to maintain grange accounts (indicating some degree of numeracy was required for the role), administer discipline, and sometimes to facilitate or conduct business transactions.¹⁹ The granger would have himself reported to the cellarer, who usually had his office in the western side of the abbey close to the lay brother quarters.

¹⁹ ‘The Granges: The Granger’, in D. H. Williams, *The Cistercians in the Early Middle Ages* (Gracewing, 1998), pp. 287–88.

Some *conversi* were skilled craftsmen, and subsequently some granges were set up for industry rather than or as well as farming. This would have facilitated not only the self-sustainability of the order, creating things like tiles, nails, and tools from the products of the land they owned and with the labour of the men within the order – but would also have created specialised products for sale at markets as well. Recent archaeological analysis from Fountains Abbey uncovered a massive industrial-scale tannery directly adjacent to the abbey itself, challenging the idea that all industrial work was conducted on far-away granges and that the home granges were also utilised for these purposes.²⁰

Because granges are intrinsically linked to the *conversi*, meaning we can place the majority of the early economic success of the Cistercians directly onto their shoulders. The twelfth-century success of granges was entirely due to the skilled management and labour of the *conversi*. With the addition of hired hands as necessary, all roles on and directly associated with the grange were conducted by the *conversi* – ranging from animal husbandry to selling the wool at local marketplaces.²¹ Choir monks were (generally) prohibited from interaction with seculars in order to maintain their cloistered lifestyle, so laypeople were largely dealt with by the *conversi* – and this would especially have been true at the granges, where interaction with secular workmen and attending marketplaces to sell goods would have been a regular occurrence. The local knowledge of the *conversi* would be invaluable to ensure success in several different ways, and the availability of a mixed economy facilitated by skilled *conversi* adds to the importance of these monks to the wider Cistercian order.

Decline of the *Conversi*

For almost one hundred years, the *conversi* had been the metaphorical backbone of the Cistercian order; on one hand propping up the Cistercian economy with the cultivation of the granges leading to unprecedented success and profit, and on the other hand allowing the choir monks to focus on the liturgy and attract benefactors

²⁰ Mark Brown, 'Archaeologists Find "Missing Link" in History of Fountains Abbey', Science, *The Guardian*, 25 October 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/oct/25/archaeologists-find-missing-link-history-fountains-abbey>> [accessed 7 April 2026].

²¹ Megan Cassidy-Welch, 'Status, Space, and Representation: The Cistercian Lay Brother', in *Monastic Spaces and Their Meanings: Thirteenth-Century English Cistercian Monasteries*, Medieval Church Studies (Brepols Publishers, 2001), pp. 167–93.

However, despite their importance in the growth and continued success of the order, by the middle of the thirteenth century a marked decline in the number of lay brothers began to occur and by the time of the dissolution, many monasteries either had single digit numbers of *conversi*, or even none at all. There is no single primary reason for this – rather, a series of decisions, real-world events, and a worsening economic situation all snowballed into the rapid decline in the number of *conversi* within the order.

The roots of the decline are difficult to define, but potentially began with the rising number of *conversi* revolts and hostilities - recorded with growing frequency in the latter third of the twelfth century and into the thirteenth. It is clear that the *conversi* had been subject to inequality both institutionally and individually compared to the choir monks since their inception, despite active attempts by the early order (such as the creation of *Usages*) to dispel this. Growing resentment over their status as secondary to the choir monks led to a situation where revolts and hostility may have seemed the only way to push back. Many examples of *conversi* violence and rebellious incidences are recorded in the *Statuta* – ranging from vague ‘excesses’ which are barely detailed, to drunkenness, theft, adultery, physical violence, and murder amongst others. In England and Wales, a prohibition on alcohol consumption at the granges was enforced in response to numerous incidences of *conversi* drunkenness before later spreading to several regions of France.²² This in itself caused several incidences of retaliation for the ban – and considering the bans begin to occur around 1180, at a time when incidences of violence and revolt amongst *conversi* were increasing, it could be argued that this served as a breaking point for the *conversi* who were already disillusioned with the inequality of their role. The increasing incidences of violence probably created a perception of the *conversi* as troublemakers, which led to a reluctance by monasteries to take on more *conversi* as time went on – despite their overall importance to the growth of the order. It is worth remembering, however, that all reports of violence come from senior monastic figures, and that the lay brothers, who were largely illiterate, were unable to contribute to, review, nor access what was written about them. Similarly, whilst reported incidents of hostility become gradually more frequent, they involve a mere

²² ‘Not Conversi but Perversi’, in J. France, *Separate but Equal - Cistercian Lay Brothers 1120 - 1350* (Cistercian Publications, 2012), pp. 269–99.

fraction of the high number of *conversi* in the order. It is also difficult to define violence, and examination of the *Statuta* for specific examples has led to different historians recording vastly different numbers of incidents based on their own criteria for definition.²³

The second and third major causes can first be traced back to two early thirteenth-century rulings. In 1208, the allowance for leasing of monastic lands “less useful or too distant for suitable cultivation” was created by the Cistercian General Chapter to improve efficiency and facilitate ease of management,²⁴ and in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council abolished the Cistercian privilege of tithe exemption.²⁵ The leasing of lands was probably first introduced as a practical solution for the number of land donations that had been made that were too far from the abbey to be practical – as well as for land that was not suitable for cultivation,²⁶ but also perhaps in response to a general trepidation about recruiting so-called troublesome *conversi* to staff an increasing number of granges at a time when revolts were commonplace. This rule was repealed, revised, and re-instated by the General Chapter several times over the next ten years, until in 1224 a statute was passed that allowed all owned land to be leased subject to the abbot’s approval. This brought in much-needed money to abbeys who had been suffering from financial difficulties, sometimes fuelled by overambitious building projects and expansion, but also had the effect of reducing the necessity of the *conversi*. Tithe exemption following soon afterwards also became an issue. It had initially been introduced as a policy to assist nascent monasteries with setting up, but the rapid spread of the Cistercians across Europe had been unprecedented and lands which had previously been tithed were being donated to them in great numbers. This missing income was creating massive losses of revenue for tithe owners. The abolishment of the tithe exemption in 1215 changes meant that the profits of the granges were reduced, and it became a much more attractive prospect to lease out land rather than self-manage it with *conversi*.

The emergence of the Mendicant orders in the early thirteenth century, such as the Augustinians and the Franciscans amongst others, would also likely have had an

²³ Cassidy-Welch, ‘Status, Space, and Representation: The Cistercian Lay Brother’.

²⁴ ‘Decline and Near Extinction’, in J. France, *Separate but Equal - Cistercian Lay Brothers 1120 - 1350* (Cistercian Publications, 2012), p. 300.

²⁵ *Fourth Lateran Council : 1215 Council Fathers - Papal Encyclicals*, Councils, 11 November 1215 <<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum12-2.htm>> [accessed 22 April 2026].

²⁶ ‘Decline and Near Extinction’.

impact on the numbers of the *conversi*. Mendicant orders were themselves reformatory orders, focusing on poverty and simplicity – with a rapid spread during the 1200s which was somewhat reminiscent of the Cistercians themselves a century earlier. They served the local populace of wherever they were located, typically within large towns and cities, rather than living a claustral lifestyle and would likely have been very appealing to young recruits who may, in previous years, have joined the Cistercian order (and other cloistered orders) as both monks and as *conversi*.

A final, massive blow to both choir monk and *conversi* recruitment was delivered by the Black Death. The death toll of the black death is estimated to be approximately one-third of the population of Europe alone, and the effect on monastic houses was massive. It is likely that all Cistercian houses, despite being cloistered and somewhat separated from mainstream society in both the cloister and on the granges, suffered great losses. A specific example can be seen at Rievaulx Abbey, which by the end of the fourteenth century had only fourteen monks, three *conversi*, and their abbot remaining – down from earlier-mentioned highs of around five hundred choir monks and *conversi* in the mid-twelfth century.²⁷ Numbers of recruits to Cistercian abbeys never recovered after the Black Death, especially so for *conversi* – who in some cases had all but disappeared. The abbot Marmaduke Hubert of Fountains Abbey, in correspondence to Abbot Jean de Cirey of Cîteaux, mentions that there are no *conversi* left at Fountains in the early sixteenth century, shortly before the dissolution.²⁸ We can perhaps place some of the reasoning for this on two issues which arose during and after the Black Death: the immediate effects on the monasteries, the increased wealth and status of peasants in the post-plague years. Many Cistercian abbeys were already in debt prior to the Black Death, such as Pipewell Abbey who accumulated huge debts through advance wool sales and poor management in the preceding fifty years before the Black Death,²⁹ and the unpaid tithes and reduced grange incomes as a result of the Black Death would have exacerbated things significantly, potentially creating a two-fold recruitment problem: an unappealing environment for potential recruits (monks and *conversi* alike) and

²⁷ Sarah Foot Julie Kerr, 'Rievaulx: An Introduction', Cistercians in Yorkshire, n.d. <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/rievaulx/history/>> [accessed 25 April 2026].

²⁸ 'Decline and Near Extinction'.

²⁹ Adrian R. Bell, Chris Brooks, and Paul Dryburgh, "'Leger Est Apprendre Mes Fort Est Arendre': Wool, Debt, and the Dispersal of Pipewell Abbey (1280-1330)", *Journal of Medieval History*, 32.3 (2006), pp. 187–211, doi:10.1016/j.jmedhist.2006.07.001.

the abbeys not being able to afford to support recruit regardless. Similarly, as the population dwindled, peasants who may have become *conversi* found themselves with options which were probably more appealing than entering a monastery, which may have been seen as to be losing importance. For some people, becoming a *conversi* prior to the Black Death may have been an alternative to destitution, especially in the case of depopulation of settlements to obtain land for granges; but in a post-Black Death society new avenues of employment, income, and social status opened up to them like never before. This coupled with an effective end to the manorial system of farming post-Black Death would have had a huge impact on *conversi* recruitment.

The *conversi* had a huge impact on the spread, growth, and wealth of the Cistercian order – particularly through the twelfth century during the first 100 years or so of the order's development. The decline of the *conversi* due to various socioeconomic factors both internal and external to the order was both caused by, and further led to, a greater reliance on leasing out land - which rendered the *conversi* somewhat obsolete and eventually leading to, in some monasteries, absolute extinction. However, without the labour, local knowledge, and other contributions of the *conversi*, particularly those of the twelfth century, it is hard to imagine the Cistercians being as successful as they were. Great importance in scholarship is placed on the choir monks and their reformatory ideas and spiritual work, which attracted benefactors and undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of the order, but without the *conversi* they may have had an income based primarily on donation and it is difficult to see how they could have spread so far and wide. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that, without the *conversi*, the Cistercians may have been a substantially smaller order and would perhaps have left significantly less of a contribution on local histories, landscapes, and religious institutions.

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